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AUTHOR Gullatt, David E.; Lemoine, Dwayne A.
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ABSTRACT

Administrators have many methods at their disposal to use in the struggle to control truancy. This paper describes the kinds of truancy-reduction efforts most commonly used: stringent laws and regulations (such as parental sanctions, zero credit, suspensions, and police intervention), inschool programs (the school-climate-improvement and the effective-school approaches), computer technology tracking systems, and community intervention. The paper concludes that the multimodal approach involving the family, student, and school has produced the most effective results. The student's attitude toward the school is the most important factor in combating truancy. Finally, the school administrator is responsible for creating a school climate that motivates students to attend. (Contains 26 references.) (LMI)

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ASSISTANCE FOR THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR CONCERNED ABOUT STUDENT TRUANCY

a professional research article
written by

David E. Gullatt, Ph.D.
Northwestern State University of Louisiana
Natchitoches, LA

and

Dwayne A. Lemoine, M.Ed.
Rapides Parish School Board
Alexandria, LA

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Assistance for the School Administrator Concerned About Student Truancy

Introduction

Much literature has been published offering solutions to reduce absenteeism (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Kube & Ratigan, 1992). Most of this research can be divided into four main categories. The first group consists of stringent laws and regulations used to curtail absenteeism by the local community and through state initiatives (Eastwold, 1989). The second group contains in-school programs being used by administrators within their schools (Testerman, 1996). The third cluster emphasizes the use of computer technology to make anti-truancy programs assessable (Visscher & Bos, 1993). The last group consists of community intervention programs that are being implemented throughout the United States (Bell et al., 1994).

Assistance Through Stringent Laws and Regulations

The strict rules approach toward student attendance at school contends that truancy is more than just a "school" issue and that the most successful efforts directed toward a reduction in absenteeism are those that involve both school personnel and the community (Eastwold, 1989). Eastwold further states that programs requiring the contacting of parents concerning unexplained absences work more efficiently with a computerized attendance record complete with an automatic dialing system for contacting parents.

Many states have taken up the battle against truancy by enacting laws that impose penalties on the truants and/or their parents (Shapiro, 1989). This hard line approach is

being effected throughout the United States in the hope of breaking the truant-to-criminal evolution. Specific policies are presented below.

Parental Sanctions

In Arkansas, as in several other states, the State Legislature passed a measure instructing courts to fine parents if they miss certain parent-teacher conferences or if their children skip school (Shapiro, 1989). In Tulsa County, Oklahoma, a similar hard line approach to combating truancy was implemented in its 16 school districts (Wilson, 1993). A uniform system, absence registration system (ARS), was used to keep an accurate account of absenteeism. These absences were categorized as excused or unexcused. The unexcused absences were investigated by "family outreach" police officers. In the first three years of its implementation over 600 cases were prosecuted, resulting in over 300 convictions in which a parent or guardian was fined and received some form of counseling. Since its beginning in 1989, a 45% reduction in the dropout rate has occurred at practically no cost to the school district. By keeping 800 more students on the roll, approximately $3,000 in both state and local reimbursement was received for each student based on the school district's average daily attendance. It was noted that for every 200 cases brought to court, more than 400 students returned to school (Wilson, 1993).

Louisiana law enforcement officials in Iberville parish are beginning to assist the Iberville parish school system with a newly adopted attendance policy that punishes parents of truants. According to the policy, if a student is found truant from school during school hours, his or her parent(s) may be assessed a fine in addition to any school

sanctions toward the student for unexcused absence ("Parents to Pay," 1997). Officials feel that this policy will lessen student desire to walk the city streets during school hours.

Zero Credit

Some school systems in Alabama also subscribe to a strict rules policy for attendance (Bishop, 1989), requiring that students obtain a doctor's excuse when returning to school after an illness. Teachers are required to assign a grade of "F" or a zero for work missed during unexcused absences. Students are only allowed to make-up assignments during an excused absence according to Bishop.

The Austin (Texas) Independent School District adopted a similar attendance policy for the 1982-83 school year. Under this policy a student was allowed a maximum of ten absences per semester for course credit to be earned. It was during the 1982-83 school year that this district enjoyed an all-time high attendance of 93.5% (Ligon & Jackson, 1990). It should be noted that the following spring, the Texas Legislature mandated that the maximum number of absences be reduced to five days instead of ten, with the provision that principals could excuse absences at their discretion. During the next year, attendance remained as high as it had the previous year. However, the following year, i.e., the second year of the "principal discretion" policy, attendance declined remarkably. The five absence rule failed because obtaining an excuse for an absence was so easy that being absent frequently did not increase a student's risk of losing credit (Ligon & Jackson, 1990). For the last ten years Louisiana has operated under a policy that limits the number of days a student may be absent from school to receive credit (Louisiana Department of Education, 1995). School districts must be careful in implementing such policies since

some state's efforts to penalize truants academically have proven to be unconstitutional because the policy was not specifically related to the educational purpose of the school (Zirkel, 1993).

School Suspensions

Kube and Ratigan (1992) report that some school districts in Iowa encourage parental involvement in attendance programs by insisting that the child bring a verified excuse to school or an absence will be treated as truancy. These districts conduct in-school suspensions for unexcused absentees on Saturday mornings from 8:00 to 11:30 a.m. Teachers give truant children assignments that were missed during absence from school. If the student fails to produce the work, he or she receives an additional Saturday suspension. Eventually the student may receive a five-day suspension for failure to make up work as a result of the absence. If a student misses ten days of school, then the parents are notified that their child will not receive academic credit in a specific class if more absences occur. Although there is an appeals process, appeals are contingent on the student's completing the school work and supplying acceptable reasons for subsequent absences (Kube & Ratigan, 1992).

Police Interventions Without Parental Sanctions

In the Bronx, a 1950s-style anti-truancy program has been launched by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Police officers, driving an undercover van, patrol the streets of New York picking up truants. The "hunt" begins each morning at about 9:30 a.m. and ends when the van unloads at the "catchment center" where truants will fill out forms and be instructed to return to school. Each principal is notified of the delinquent student and

awaits the return of each student where disciplinary actions will be imposed by each school (Rubin, 1994).

Assistance Through In-school Programs

School Climate

Data was collected, in a longitudinal survey of approximately 30,000 sophomores from 1,105 public and private high schools nationwide, to study student alienation and rejection of school (Testerman, 1996). The findings of this study concluded that dropouts rated teacher interest in students as being fair-to-poor. This opinion of teacher interest in students was also held by non-college-bound students. Clearly, improving students' perceptions of the degree of concern that teachers feel for them could positively affect students' attitudes about school and increase the likelihood of their high school graduation. And in fact, poor student-teacher relations could negatively influence student self-concept and ultimately student success at school.

Testerman also investigated the self-esteem of students before and after they dropped out of school. Surprisingly, dropouts had a higher self-esteem than those non-college-bound students who stayed in school. Dropping out of school apparently had beneficial effects on the self-images of these students. School-related contributors such as lack of positive, cooperative relationships involving students, staff, parents, and administrators, affect students' school performance and their decisions to drop out. Finally, Testerman reported that school-based student interaction efforts relying on volunteer teacher advisors designed to keep marginal students in school through positive counseling were being implemented throughout the United States. As a result of this report, schools

are beginning to explore the affective domain when dealing with at-risk students and their problems regarding truancy and dropping out of school (Testerman, 1996).

The Sarah J. Hale High School Approach

Jay Schechter, Principal at Sarah J. Hale High School in Brooklyn, New York, made lassoing truants a top priority since becoming principal (Steinberg, 1995). Nearly one in four children, or 385 out of 1,675, were absent everyday. Schechter set up a computerized telephone system that delivered messages to each parent of a student not in school for that day. He then required teachers to follow up on those messages personally and keep a weekly log of every student's excuse for each absence. He also dispatched assistants to visit the homes of children who were consistently absent more than twice a month. These actions caused student enrollment to increase 50 students per day, but still 250 students shy of where the school superintendent, Dr. Rudy Crew, said it should be.

Dr. Crew, in outlining his goals, insisted that daily attendance increase to at least 95% over the current average. This would mean an increase in attendance of nearly 100,000 students a day over the current average in his Brookland, New York school district. Administrators at Sarah J. Hale High School, who worked so hard, could raise the attendance rate only three percentage points, to 80%. This was still 6% shy of the district average and 10% shy of Dr. Crew's goal of 95% attendance.

Several reasons were cited for the poor attendance rate at Sarah J. Hale High School even after such valiant efforts by administration and staff. State education officials attributed the lack of success in raising attendance rates to the social pressures of city life. Some students feared for their safety in traveling to and from school since the school was

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located in the city's worst neighborhood. In addition, about half the student enrollment was eligible for federal aid known as Title I and were considered at-risk. Some officials also attributed the sheer size of Hale as being a cause of truancy. Many students noted that if they missed school, no one would notice (Steinberg, 1995).

Dr. Crew provided few details as to how he hoped to raise attendance, but agreed with Mr. Schechter that the best way to lure students back to the classroom was to tantalize them with stimulating course work. Making school a place where students want to be, has now become a top priority for the superintendent.

Effective School Approach

Harte (1995) provided an overview of the student absentee problem in Canada. Principles and components from a vast range of strategies and projects were offered by Harte for improving school attendance. Harte noted that literature on absenteeism after 1985 had shifted its focus from the student as truant, to the school as part of both the problem and the solution. Five major principles were noted as being necessary to any effective school intervention program. They were: (a) awareness, (b) change in perspectives, (c) early intervention, (d) cooperation, and (e) involvement.

According to Harte, these principles were accompanied by several components of an effective school intervention program. They included: (a) developing and implementing attendance policies, (b) monitoring, (c) tracking and recording, (d) involving parents, (e) providing guidance and counseling, and (f) providing relevant curriculum on alternative programs. The researcher found that programs implemented as school-wide improvements had consistently been successful in reducing attendance problems. Effective schools were

student-centered and operated as: (a) a caring institutional and functional community, (b) a community organization, (c) an experimenter and risk-taker, and (d) a team.

Once hard line approaches to combating truancy have been affected, it becomes clear that the school becomes the last resort for the advances on combating truancy. It is then the function of the school to become a place where students want to attend, and not a place where they must attend. Creating an effective school becomes a top priority in an administrator's struggle to control truancy.

Assistance Through the Use of Computer Technology

Sheats and Dunkleberger (1979) investigated an elementary school in Maryland to determine the effects of contacting parents about their child's truancy on a daily basis. All contacts were done by telephone. All of the parents of one experimental group were contacted by the principal, while the parents in the other experimental group were contacted by the school secretary. Data indicated that the experimental procedures had similar impact upon student's attendance patterns regardless of who made the phone call. The research also demonstrated that the home contacted by the school, either if the person was the principal or a school secretary, contributed to a reduction in absenteeism from the previous year.

Implementing a procedure which contacts parents directly would be impossible on a school-wide basis (Sheats & Dunkleberger, 1979). There is simply not enough time in the day for the calls to be made. In addition, it was concluded that the percentage of telephone contacts could be improved by calling parents in the evening. Unfortunately, this would require a person to work after school hours, keep accurate records of attendance,

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extensive record keeping, and careful documentation of such contacts. All of these activities put additional burdens on already overburdened administrators. It is this extra burden that encourages administrators to turn to computer technology for a solution to the problem. However, it is important to select the proper computer technology that will meet the school's needs (Haigh, 1993).

The effectiveness of whether computer technology reduces absenteeism has been put to the test in several studies. The first of which is a study where City Technology Colleges in the United Kingdom, which use computer-assisted absence registration systems (ARS), was compared to secondary schools that used manual paper registration (Haigh, 1993). The findings revealed that attendance increased in the City Technology Colleges, whereas attendance remained the same in the secondary schools. The average attendance rates at City Technology Colleges were maintained between 90% to 97% while using some form of electronic registration system.

By contrast, another study (Visscher & Bos, 1993) found that the effectiveness of using computer technology was not substantial. In 1988 the Dutch government initiated a project designed to investigate whether the computer could be used to significantly reduce absenteeism. The central research questions of this project were: (a) To what degree is ARS used by project schools?; (b) To what extent did absenteeism rates change in experimental and in control schools between 1988 and 1991?; (c)What factors stimulate a successful implementation of ARS?; and (d) Did the use of ARS bring about effects other than changes in absenteeism rates?

A quasi-experimental design with a pre-test and two post-tests was used to conduct this experiment on thirty participating schools. The results did not show any conclusive evidence to show any substantial reduction in absenteeism with the schools implementing ARS. A number of possible reasons for this were given. First, ARS alone might not be powerful enough to reduce absenteeism. Secondly, many of the project schools proved to be schools for lower vocational education and were small. These schools also contained a high percentage of students from ethnic minorities. And thirdly, the study did not show how effectively the participating schools used ARS. Some schools may have used ARS as only a means of registration and did not implement some policy with ARS to help enforce truancy. However, the action did improve record keeping and saved administrative time (Visscher & Bos, 1993).

Osiris School Administration Program

One such computer program now being used in some schools is the Osiris School Administration Program, a software package that is being adopted nationally (Osiris School Administration System, 1990).This data base program allows the administrator in charge of attendance or discipline to maintain accurate and up-to-date detailed information on each child. The Osiris computer program uses the daily absentee list to call the home of each student. For example, when a student accumulates five absences, a phone message explaining this is delivered to the student's home (Fletcher, Howley, & Piele, 1990). A similar call is made at nine unexcused absences. A computer-generated letter is also sent to the home of the student informing the parents of the child's unexcused absences. Thus, by the time the child has acquired nine unexcused absences, thirteen contacts have been

made to his/her home. Finally, at ten unexcused absences, the parents are sent a registered letter expressing the gravity of their child's situation. The guidelines for how often these contacts are made can be programmed according to state or local attendance policy (Fletcher et al., 1990). For example, in Louisiana no credit is allowed after the tenth unexcused absence in a secondary subject and the Osiris computer program may be programmed to inform the parent by phone call or letter of a student's impending failure due to non attendance.

Comprehensive Information Management for Schools (CIMS III)

Some school districts, such as Rapides Parish, in Louisiana are turning to computer technology that links all schools in the district to a centrally located data processing office. Here student records such as attendance, disciplinary actions, grades, dropout dates, ethnic origins, and other student information are kept within the central school board office main computer. This particular computer system and program, called CIMS III, offers the same capability as the Osiris Program, but on a wider scope. It allows all student records of the entire district to be kept at the central office and easily accessed by school administrators (Comprehensive Information Management for Schools, 1993).

There are many software programs offered on the market today to aid district and school administrators in the timely task of tracking students, such as: (a) CIMS III, (b) Osiris, and (c) Administrator's Plus (Osiris School Administration System, 1990; Comprehensive Information Management for Schools, 1993; Administrator's Plus, 1993). It is important that an administrator or school district attendance supervisor carefully select the proper computer program to aid in student attendance record keeping. The

record keeping program and software must work in conjunction with additional in-school programs for combating truancy.

Assistance Through Community Intervention

Truancy Project

In the past few years the community has become increasingly involved in anti-truancy programs. In Atlanta, through the vision of Presiding Judge Glenda Hatchett Johnson of the Fulton County Juvenile Court, the Truancy Project was put into effect. This project matches volunteer lawyers with children who have been reported for excessive school absence. The object of this project is to effect an early, positive intervention through the representation of troubled children, while bringing to bear a whole spectrum of social services. In theory, an attorney volunteer acts as both attorney and guardian for the child. Data collected from the results of the Truancy Project indicate that over 50% of these impending school failures returned to school and passed the 1991-92 academic year according to Walsh (1993).

Chronic Absenteeism Pilot (CAP) Project

A similar program, the Chronic Absenteeism Pilot (CAP) project, was implemented over a two-year period to reduce absenteeism in a medium-sized city secondary school (Kleine, 1994). The program engaged in interagency efforts to provide coordinated, integrated, and student-centered services to chronically absent youth and their families. Data was obtained from interviews with 63 key resource persons. Interviews with community associates assigned to CAP, the CAP supervisor, a representative sample of CAP students, a matched sample of school attendees, and teachers provided additional

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data. Findings of this project revealed that despite elaborate interagency agreements, very little was known about potentially collaborative efforts on behalf of chronically absent youth in the city. The program was hampered by basic ideological differences and agendas held by social services and public schools. The problem of chronic absenteeism was greater than previously thought. Teachers held a negative view of the CAP students while the CAP students expressed indifference toward their schools (Kleine, 1994).

Multimodal Intervention

"The problem of truancy is more than just a student issue, a family issue, or a school issue, it is a complex whole comprised of at least these three components" (Bell et al., 1994, p. 203). Bell and others suggest a multimodal approach which combines all three of these target areas. This multimodal approach, which targets the student, the family, and the school, has proven to produce the most effective results.

The first step in the Multimodal Intervention Program is to assess the causes of the truancy problem and what individual needs of the student are missing. Then an intervention plan may be established accordingly. The program should consist of such components as therapy for conduct disorders or other problems contributing to truancy, extra academic help through tutoring, and contingency contracts or offering incentives for good attendance.

The second step in intervention is to meet with the family to assess the extent to which the truant behavior is due to familial conflicts. If this is the case, then family therapy should be initiated (Stewart, Valentine, & Amundson, 1991).

The third step in this intervention program entails changes within the school system. These changes would involve clearly stating the school's attendance policy and its enforcement, incentives and rewards for good attendance, and require assigned work be turned in for all absences (Miller, 1986).

Kube and Ratigan (1992) also offer a multimodal approach to minimize student absences. In their approach, brief role descriptors for what principals, teachers, parents, and students can do to reduce absenteeism are given.

Principal's Role

The principal's role is one that sets expectations for teachers and students that will allow for successful attendance policies. Responsibilities of the principal include: (a) supervising and monitoring attendance, (b) developing and utilizing the school attendance policy, (c) facilitating, cultivating, and inspiring a participative climate, (d) developing behavior management policies that do not unnecessarily remove students from class for disciplinary reasons, and (e) consistently and persistently enforcing policies and procedures. The use of computer-assisted absence registration systems would greatly enhance the principal's role in tracking these truants (Kube & Ratigan, 1992).

Teacher's Role

The role of the teacher is absolutely imperative in relaying the importance of daily attendance to students. To fully facilitate their role, teachers should achieve the following: (a) insure that educational learning experiences occur each day, (b) let students know they were missed when they have been absent, (c) require students to make up all learning

activities they missed as a result of being absent, (d) value and reward good attendance, and (e) establish an environment that makes students feel welcome at school.

Parent's Role

Parents also play a major part in any effort to improve student attendance. Parents are encouraged to accomplish the following: (a) be responsible for their child's daily attendance, (b) work in collaboration with the school to attain the highest possible attendance rate for their child, (c) recognize that learning opportunities missed due to absences cannot be exactly duplicated at a later time, and (d) support the school in its policies regarding attendance.

Student's Role

Students are capable of dealing with their attendance expectations. They must understand clearly the school's attendance policy and must be held accountable for not meeting these expectations. Some student responsibilities are: (a) knowing attendance standards and expectations, (b) being accountable for their daily attendance, (c) becoming aware of the importance of daily attendance, (d) being responsible for completing activities to compensate for lost learning opportunities after absences, and (e) completing make-up work on time (Kube & Ratigan, 1992).

In the past, research and interventions have treated truancy as having only one cause or being due to one factor. However, the effectiveness of truancy intervention could be increased by utilizing a multimodal approach combining all three of these target areas (Bell et al., 1994).

Summary and Conclusion

Administrators have many methods at their disposal to use in the struggle to control truancy. Some methods call for the intervention of the community, such as the Truancy Project used in Atlanta while others utilize laws and statutes in the hope of curtailing truancy. Current research also reveals that the school is where the battle to control truancy should be fought. With this in mind, the school administrator is in the best position to combat truancy within the school.

The multimodal approach involving the family, student, and the school has proven to produce the most effective results. In utilizing this multimodal approach, the administrator would need assistance in tracking truants. The use of computer-assisted Absence Registration System (ARS) would greatly enhance an administrator's ability to keep an accurate and up-to-date account of absences. In addition, the results of this research clearly points to a multimodal intervention approach that attacks truancy in three areas to have the greatest effect on reducing truancy at a school. These areas include: (a) the student, (b) the family, and (c) the school.

Research has identified a student's attitude towards the school is the single most important factor in combating truancy. It is then the responsibility of the school administrator to fashion a school where children want to attend as opposed to having to attend.

The effectiveness of truancy interventions that target a single area all have a limited degree of success. It is logical then that an approach which combines all of these target areas into one multimodal intervention program would only enhance its

effectiveness. Also, studies which have tested truancy intervention that affects the child, the family, and the school system, have been found to be quite effective in reducing truancy rates. Bell et al. (1994) state,

> It is not possible to totally solve the problem by focusing on only one aspect or target area because they are all intricately related and connected to one another. It makes sense, therefore, to utilize an approach that addresses all of these aspects. (p. 210)

Thus, an effective school administrator will address the truancy issue by developing a collaborative effort that involves staff, parents, students, and community. Relying strictly on any one particular anti-truant procedure will have its rewards over doing nothing, but this effort will provide only minimal results, at best. Devoting time to survey, study, develop, and implement a comprehensive attendance policy that involves a collaboration of efforts, will greatly aid administrators in their struggle to control truancy.

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